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## **Constructivism**

Early distance education courses, such as correspondence courses, were based on an instructivist approach to teaching. Using this approach, teachers deliver content to mostly passive students. Limited opportunities for student-initiated questions, independent thought, or interpersonal interaction occur in this environment. However, during the past few decades, there has been a shift away from this approach toward one that is learner-centered and collaborative, and that uses a constructivist philosophy.

Constructivism recognizes that students are at different levels of understanding and have different life experiences. The individuality of perspective, due to unique life experiences, creates subjective sense-making of sensory inputs. Thus, the basic premise of constructivism is that each individual *constructs* his or her own meanings. However, within this broad perspective, constructivism comes in several varieties, including cognitive constructivism, social constructivism, and radical constructivism.

Cognitive constructivism, based largely on the work of Jean Piaget, holds that knowledge is the result of the processes of accommodation and assimilation as the learner constructs knowledge that accurately corresponds to reality as it exists in the real world. The focus is on internal sense-making.

Social constructivism is the philosophy used in this book. It is closely associated with the work of both Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, and assumes that both individual sense-making and social processes are central and essential to the learning process. Thus, learning is a shared, rather than an individual, experience. Like cognitive constructivism, it assumes that objective reality is knowable to the individual.

Radical constructivism is based on the view that knowledge is constructed from individual experience and is not an accurate representation of external reality. Both cognitive constructivism and radical constructivism fail to account adequately for the language and the social dimensions of learning; radical constructivism also does not recognize the existence of objective truth. Without objective truth, radical constructivists criticize assessment of student learning based on the teacher's view of truth.

Constructivism influences our conceptualization of learning. Experience is not the mere description of our lived events but rather the cognitive interpretations and affective reactions to them. Analogously, teachers can create events that objectively exist (i.e., truly occur) and may be labeled by an observer as "good teaching" without any control over what, if anything, is actually learned.

However, concepts of learning do inform instruction. As Resnick and Klopfer (1989) contend, for many years, "theories of classroom management, textbook design, and organization of [educational] practice all flowed from... [the] assumption" that learning is "an accumulation of pieces of knowledge and bits of skill" (p. 2). In contrast, modern notions of constructivism assert that learners are thinkers who build knowledge upon a foundation of experience and are not mere repositories of information (Resnick & Klopfer, 1989).

The social constructivist philosophy suggests that instructors create educational events that catalyze active learning, thereby integrating course content into students' extant knowledge. Instructional techniques that can support this outcome include:

- Cognitive scaffolding: Instructors assist students by providing suggestions, comments, and feedback to help bridge the gap between present student abilities and mastery of instructional objectives.
- Fading: Instructors gradually remove learning supports as the students gain mastery.
- Cognitive apprenticeship: Students learn by engaging in authentic activities with experts in the field.
- Collaborative learning: Students construct knowledge by interacting with others in learning groups.

## References

Resnik, L.B., & Klopfer, L.E. (1989). *Toward the thinking curriculum: Current cognitive research – 1989 ASCD yearbook* (pp. 1–18). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.